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3 Men, Sport, Spinal Cord Injury and the Narrative Construction of Coherence

BRETT SMITH AND ANDREW C. SPARKES

Introduction

Drawing on data generated from a research project that focuses on the lived experiences of men who have experienced a spinal cord injury (SCI) through playing rugby football union, this chapter examines how a sense of coherence is constructed within one person's life story. Narrative studies, as Seymour-Smith (2002) notes, have documented the importance to many individuals of presenting a coherent life story. Yet, the notion of coherence, a shibboleth in the field of narrative inquiry, is a contested issue. For example, Mishler (1999) argues that coherence, as a concept, is essentially and intractably ambiguous, defying efforts at formal and precise definition. For him, therefore, one way forward is to recognise the essential reflexivity of coherence and the manner in which this is a negotiated achievement among the participants involved in telling and listening to a story. Accordingly, one of the areas he asks researchers to direct their attention towards is the *artful practices* through which storytellers *do* coherence, and the complex and differentiated ways stories can be organised to serve their meaning-making functions.

In a similar vein, Gubrium and Holstein (1998, 2000), and Holstein and Gubrium (2000), concerned with the practical production of coherence in life stories, call for a focus on *narrative practice* which, for them, lies at the heart of self-construction. Gubrium and Holstein (1998) use this term to characterise simultaneously the activities of storytelling, the resources used to tell stories, and the auspices under which stories get told. Therefore, as Holstein and Gubrium (2000) point out, a focus on narrative practice allows us to analyse the relationships between the *hows* and *whats* of storytelling. Here, the analysis centres on storytellers engaged in both the work of constructing identities and on the circumstances of narration, respectively. As such, the storytelling process is viewed as both actively constructive and locally constrained.

Holstein and Gubrium (2000) go on to argue that while experience can provide a bountiful supply of potentially reportable, storyable items, it is the incorporation of particular items into a coherent account that gives them meaning. Thus, storytelling is an on-going process of *composition*. Importantly, even though local and broader narrative formats can offer similar

or conventional guidelines for how stories might unfold, they do not by themselves determine individual storylines. Rather, as Holstein and Gubrium (2000) suggest, there is a persistent interplay between what is available for conveying a story and how a particular narrative unfolds in practice. It is from this interplay that both self-coherence and diversity develop.

A concern with *narrative practice*, therefore, encourages researchers to focus on both the play and complexity of narrative, its similarities, differences, coherences and incoherences. In particular, as we have argued elsewhere (Smith and Sparkes, 2002), the reflexive analytic approach advocated by Gubrium and Holstein (1998) enables researchers to alternately focus on the *whats* and the constitutive *hows* of social life, allowing them to shift their attention from the substantive or the contextual to the artful components of reality construction and back again. That is, it allows researchers to maintain a focus on the interactional accomplishment of local realities in terms of, for example, the ways in which stories about experience are presented, structured, and made to cohere, while also allowing them to maintain an awareness of the institutional and cultural conditions that shape this accomplishment. Thus, questions about why a story is told in certain ways (the *hows*) are asked in relation to questions about its plot and content (the *whats*), as these are equally important in understanding how meaningful interaction transpires.

Gubrium and Holstein (2000) emphasise that because interpretive practice is two-sided, there is an inescapable analytic tension within it that needs to be accepted but that cannot be completely resolved. This is because to designate an analytic point of entry and foreground one side of the practice, eg. the *hows*, means that the other side, the *whats*, is placed in the background. The process Gubrium and Holstein advocate for moving back and forth between the components that compromise interpretive practice is that of *analytic bracketing*. For them, analytic bracketing operates along with analysis and

... amounts to an orientating procedure for alternately focusing on the *whats* and then the *hows* of interpretive practice (or vice versa) in order to assemble both a contextually scenic and a contextually constructive picture of everyday language-in-use. (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000, p.500)

The objective is to shift back and forth between discursive practice and discourses-in-practice, documenting each in turn and making informative references to the other in the process. Thus, Gubrium and Holstein note, either discursive machinery or available discourses becomes the provisional phenomenon, while concern in the other is temporarily deferred, but not forgotten.

Importantly, this alternating movement does not privilege conditions or artfulness and Gubrium and Holstein (2000) assiduously avoid analytically privileging either discursive practice or discourse-in-practice. Having said this,

they accept that a simultaneous focus on the artful and the substantial is a practical impossibility. Accordingly, Gubrium and Holstein (2000) suggest that analytic bracketing allows the researcher to appreciate their respective contributions to interpretation while respecting their reflexive relationship.

For us, attempting to appreciate both respective contributions and respect reflexive relationships has encouraged us to adopt a more critical stance towards the kinds of analysis we adopt at various points in our work on men, sport, SCI, and acquired disability. For instance, one form of analysis that we have applied to the data generated in the life history interviews can be classed as 'content' in nature. This form of analysis is intended to examine the thematic similarities and differences between the narratives provided. Here, the focus is on the *whats* rather than the *hows* of the stories told. The strength of this form of analysis lies in its capacity to develop general knowledge about the core themes that make up the content of the stories collected in an interview context with a view to identifying narrative segments and categories within context. For example, an analysis of the narratives told by four of the men in this study identified a number of core identity dilemmas associated with a loss of specific athletic and masculine identities. These dilemmas were, in turn, framed by specific public and metanarratives (Sparkes and Smith, 1999, 2002).

Despite the strengths of a content analysis, we were concerned that its use in isolation would lead to an over-determination of the themes identified in the data, seemingly 'ironing out' the contradictions and tensions contained within them. Our concerns appear warranted given Faircloth's (1999) belief that core themes can often be underscored at the expense of variation and difference, and so lead the researcher to under-appreciate the heterogeneity of experience and the storied quality of data. Hence, since this form of analysis remains abstract and formal, it often overlooks the artfulness of storytelling and misses the uniqueness of each story because it relies on the preconceived categorisations of the researcher. Consequently, as Sparkes notes,

... by seeking common themes in the stories there is the danger of missing other possible messages that individual stories might hold. (1999, p.21)

In this chapter, therefore, we proceed to analytically bracket the *whats* of the life history data generated in the interviews with one participant from a sample of forty men in order to focus on the *hows* of the stories told. Here, rather than ask what are the features that make up the content of a coherent life story following SCI, we problematise the very notion of coherence and ask how is it constructed by the same individual over time. To do this, given that the notion of narrative practice allows us to focus on both the play and complexity of narrative, and its difference and coherence, we found the principles of the approach advocated by Gubrium and Holstein (1998, 2000), and their notions of narrative composition, linkage, slippage, shifts, editing,

elasticity, and control, to be very appealing and useful. We were also attracted to this approach as we felt it offered a necessary antidote to the dangers of content forms of analysis with their tendency to over determine the consistency of themes and the constancy of meaning in life stories.

Doug's Story: Composing Coherence Within a Quest Narrative

Doug is thirty-four years of age. As a child and young adult he was very physically active, playing a number of sports, including rugby union to county standard. In 1991 he broke his neck in a rugby scrum. Seven months later his first and only son was born. After three years of much turmoil caused by SCI, he and his partner separated amicably. He has custody and looks after his "son on a full-time basis." Unable to get a job, he is now a postgraduate student studying Law. Unusually for the men in this study, he is active in the disability rights movement. The following is an extract from an interview with Doug in September 2001. It is in response to a question by Brett Smith about what his body now means to him.

The body is something that I occasionally look at and think, 'Life would be easier if I were able-bodied again'. And I suppose there are times, moments when I say to myself, 'I want to walk again'. I don't think that's unusual, because life would be easier being able-bodied again. I would certainly benefit by more movement, being able to have more control over the body, and if that came through medical advances, then okay. So fixing it, the body I mean, could be a possibility in my life time, and in that sense I do think that advances in medicine will give people, including me at times, what they want, which is to walk again, or at least gain more movement and control of the body.

But, saying all that, I really don't think that I would take a cure. I really wouldn't. Y'see, mostly I'm very happy with my life and, by and large, I see disability as a tremendously positive and worthwhile experience.

In the first part of the extract above, we witness how the body is storied as something that is potentially fixable following SCI. More specifically, Doug makes a number of *narrative linkages* that allow him to develop and articulate a body story as he brings together and juxtaposes a complex grouping of objects and/or events to convey meaning. Here, the linkages compose a restitution narrative as defined by Frank (1995). Translated, the basic storyline is that yesterday I was able-bodied, today I'm disabled, but tomorrow I'll be able-bodied again. As Doug continues, the linkages compose a body-self that attempts to reassert *predictability* through, for example, medical regimes. Furthermore, as the linkages extend, we can interpret Doug's body as *dissociated* from the self, yet its *desire* stays *productive*. Therefore, in keeping with the emerging pattern of composition, we might predict that if Doug had

continued with this story he would have composed further linkages with, and narratively shifted between, the *disciplined* body and the *mirroring* body (Frank, 1995; Sparkes, 1998, 2002). As Frank suggests,

The body that predisposes choice of the restitution narrative, and the body that this narrative chooses, thus falls some-where between the '*disciplined*' body and the '*mirroring*' body (1995, p.87)

Suddenly, however, there is a *narrative shift* in Doug's story, which indicates he is both able and willing to adopt different perspectives, identities and voices in his telling. Such a shift may signal that the narrator is reformulating a narrative line to voice different identities or horizons and linkages - the manner in which the teller brings together and juxtaposes a complex grouping of objects into a coherent whole - within the interview situation (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998). Thus, Doug says:

But, saying all that, I really don't think that I would take a cure.

He continues:

... I see disability as a tremendously positive and worthwhile experience. It's a chance to live a better life, a turning point in which I could say I can use disability and accept it or I could fight it until a cure is found. I think I would end up feeling very depressed for the rest of my life if I focused on a cure though. So, mostly I see disability as a positive experience and I look at the ways in which I might be able to use disability, which might mean teaching others, able-bodied people included in this, about what is like to be disabled in an able-bodied society. And I do think that I've been reborn as a person due to what has happened, although I don't mean that in a religious sense. That's because disability has taught me a great deal and has certainly made me a better person. And if a cure was found and the spinal cord could be fixed, then it devalues everything that I, and what others have done as disabled people. I also think that it doesn't tackle the problem of disability, which is to say that it's a social, and environmental matter. So, knowing all that, I do feel that disability shouldn't be regarded as simply a negative experience because it can be very happy existence. I've certainly become a better person because of what happened, and I've improved who I am. Y'see, I'm using my body very differently. I've come to realise that I have a lot to offer society, and other people, which could mean talking about my experiences and showing people that being disabled doesn't necessarily mean a life of feeling bad about yourself and body.

At the beginning of the extract, Doug uses the body's problems to link his ontological narrative to a metanarrative of *quest* (Frank, 1995). More specifically, by establishing his impairment as an opportunity and 'a turning point', and in pointing out that he feels reborn and has gained from his SCI

experience, for example, Doug constructs a *narrative footing* for the rest of the story. According to Gubrium and Holstein (1998), a narrative footing provides clues to listeners about the kinds of stories that could be told and possible points to make. Such a footing reveals the positions, they suggest, from which storytellers can offer their narratives.

Furthermore, as Doug continues with his story, we witness how the linkages that emerge produce *horizons of meaning*, or patterns of meaning that serve to convey a constructed meaning to the audience (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998). In effect, the narrative linkages composed by Doug creates a quest narrative that, in turn, constructs developing selves (Charmaz, 1987). This understanding of one's self, as the linkages testify, is *embodied*. That is, the narrative-selves nexus help bring body and self together to form the *communicative* body-self as defined by Frank (1995). What communicative bodies are about is the capacity for recognition that is enhanced through the sharing of stories, which are fully embodied. What is shared is one's body's sense of another's experience, primarily vulnerability and its suffering, but also its creativity and joy. As Doug said:

... being disabled doesn't necessarily mean a life of feeling bad about yourself and body. That's why I think that talking to people and sharing what I've learned from being disabled might help people who are new to all this. That's not to say that I have all the answers, because I don't. And there are times, as I say, when life can feel too much to bear and a cure is the first thing that I might cling to. But, that's rare, because I'm happy and I feel a much better person because of everything that has happened to me since the accident. So, in that sense, no I don't want a cure and I feel that I have much to offer society because of what has happened to my body. It's not everyday that you break your neck playing rugby, and people can learn, I think, from all the good and bad things that has happened to me since that day.

Taken together, and despite its brevity, these extracts reinforce the point that individuals *edit* stories. That is, people are not narratively "frozen" as authors of the stories they compose, but rather are editors who constantly monitor, manage, modify, and revise the emergent story (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). They also highlight how coherence is not an inherent feature of the narratives told, but is artfully crafted in the telling, drawing from the available meanings, structures and linkages that comprise stories in specific cultural contexts.

Brief Concluding Comments

Our intent in this chapter is to show narrative practice in action. Drawing on data generated from a interactive, life history interview, and concerned with narrative linkages, horizons of meaning, shifts, and editing, it is a modest

attempt to show how coherence and the meaning of experience is artfully constructed, occasioned, circumstantially formed, and influenced by the cultural conventions of telling. In this sense, it also signals that the emerging interpretations of individuals may lead them to engage with the tensions and contradictions of alternative stories in a way that can lead them towards a *coherence of incoherence*. As such, the notion of coherence should not be seen as 'natural' and 'taken for granted'. Rather, coherence in a life story is a negotiated achievement among the participants involved in telling and listening to a story.

The evidence re-presented also signals that the ethical and moral dimensions of listening to and analysing disabled people's stories are important. For example, wanting to hear stories about 'recovery', we may not only be *complicit* in sustaining and reproducing culturally preferred stories that might be disempowering, but we may also interfere with people's rights to tell their own tales, tales that may lack the coherence, plot, or resolution we, and they, desire. Likewise, the researcher(s) who solicits people's stories does not simply collect data but may assent, either implicitly or explicitly, to enter into a relationship with the respondent and become part of that person's on-going struggle toward a moral life. That struggle, an ethical practice of narrative analyses, is about affirming and witnessing events and lives as being worth telling (Levinas, 1989; Smith, 2002). Despite its brevity, we hope that this work serves as an invitation to take up the many issues it raises.

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